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ABSTRACT

The language laboratory can be effective as an extension of the intermediate or advanced classroom in Russian provided that the techniques used save the students enough time and improve their performance enough to justify making the trip to the lab. Six devices that have proven successful are (1) Review and warm up via dialogues, (2) remedial exercises in pronunciation, (3) keys to translation exercises to help the student before he hands his paper in, (4) reading tapes for comprehension and conversation stimulus in the classroom, (5) examinations, and (6) stories on tape for re-telling or plot reproduction in written form. Pattern drills are not recommended, as they represent drudgery and "the lonely lab is no place for drudgery." The more successful uses of the lab at this level are those which help the student to get through interesting material faster and help toward fusing the four basic language skills. (Author/HW)

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The Uses of the Language Laboratory in Teaching Intermediate and Advanced Russian*

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0. I would like to share with you some of the techniques we use at MIT to make language laboratory resources an extension of the intermediate or advanced classroom.

We have found that students DO use the lab if the resources save them enough time and improve their performance enough to justify making the trip to the lab.

The six devices illustrated today have all been tested in our classes in one course or another.

1. The first item is a review and warm-up unit for the beginning of the second year college course, when we must somehow blend all those strange bedfellows into a kind of speech community, and restore their forgotten Russian without boring or scaring away half the class. (A partial syllabus for this unit is shown in Fig. 1.)

We use about four dialogs, selected from a commercial course. Today's illustration comes from a lively Russian course for Poles, but you could use the recordings from Russkij jazyk za rubežom, or other available sources.

The teacher prepares pereskazy (plot summaries in 3rd person) of the first two dialogs.

On the first day of classes, we hand out a pereskaz of Dialog 1, but not the Dialog itself. The locale might be na vokzale (at the RR station), a great place to review time expressions:

F. voice: Ja vas slušaju, graždanin.
M. voice: Ja xoču u vas sprosit', vo skol'ko idet poezd v Leningrad?

The pereskaz might go something like this:

Kogdá dévuška govorít graždanínu, čto oná egó slúšaet,
on sprášivaet u neë, vo skól'ko idët póezd v Leningrád
eë v kotórom časú

You will notice that we use the "historical present" and that we explain unfamiliar words and expressions with more familiar ones:

On sprášivaet u neë, v kotórom časú idët póezd v Leningrád?
eë kogdá

On the first day of class, we go over the first pereskaz, working on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

The first assignment is to listen to the Dialog in the lab and to write it from dictation. The Dialogs average only 90 seconds in length, but we replay them with pauses. (This is called an "exploded" tape.) The student listens as many times as necessary. We do NOT give out a text. If we did, half the students would not go to the lab at all, and the rest would listen only once.

After finishing the dictation, the student checks it against a copy of the text, which is on reserve in the lab. This provides immediate feedback -- and PRIVACY in case of disaster.

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The second class meeting begins with a conversation based on Dialog 1; we then go over a pereskaz of Dialog 2.

Again the assignment is to listen and write from dictation, but this time the dictation is handed in to the teacher for correction.

The next two Dialogs are handled differently. There are no pereskazy. We give out only a small list of words and expressions. Students listen in the lab and write their own pereskazy.

This method allows us to use interesting material without bogging down in vocabulary. It insures well-prepared classes, and provides more intensive exposure to Russian speech than is possible in class hours alone.

Alternating dialogs and pereskazy provide effective review of all personal pronouns, of subject-verb agreement, of indirect questions. Verbal aspects and the use of tenses in indirect speech may be reviewed by changing the pereskazy to the past tense:

Dévuška SKAZÁLA graždanínu, čto ona egó SLÚŠAET.
On SPROSÍL eë, vo skól'ko IDËT póezd v Leningrad

We point out that the tense in the dependent clause does not change.

At the end of this series, we assign a free composition: a play inspired by the Dialogs. We urge students to be creative within stated artistic constraints. These are: BREVITY and NO FISHING IN THE DICTIONARY.

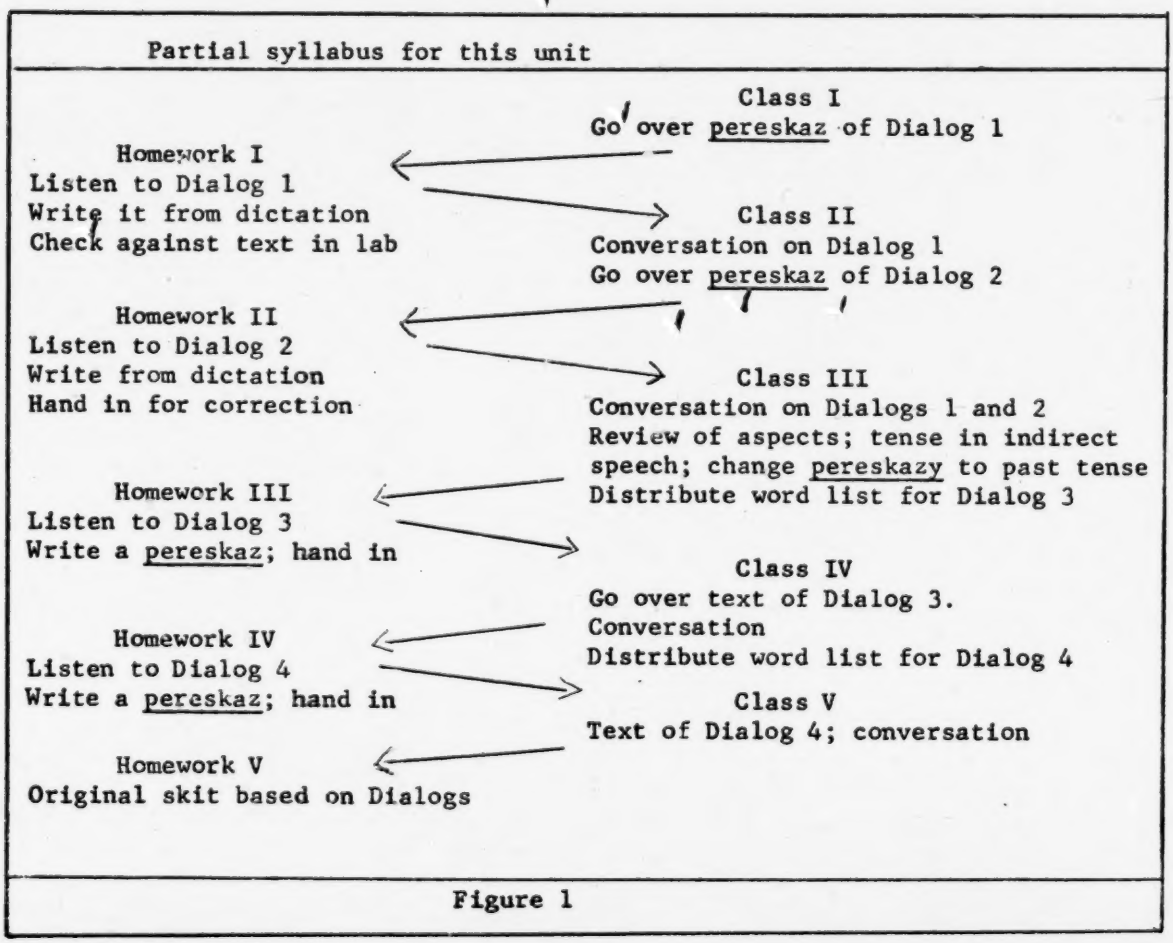
Partial syllabus for this unit
Class I
Go over pereskaz of Dialog 1
Homework I
Listen to Dialog 1
Write it from dictation
Check against text in lab
Class II
Conversation on Dialog 1
Go over pereskaz of Dialog 2
Homework II
Listen to Dialog 2
Write from dictation
Hand in for correction
Class III
Conversation on Dialogs 1 and 2
Review of aspects; tense in indirect speech; change pereskazy to past tense
Distribute word list for Dialog 3
Homework III
Listen to Dialog 3
Write a pereskaz; hand in
Class IV
Go over text of Dialog 3.
Conversation
Distribute word list for Dialog 4
Homework IV
Listen to Dialog 4
Write a pereskaz; hand in
Class V
Text of Dialog 4; conversation
Homework V
Original skit based on Dialogs

Figure 1

2. The second item is from a remedial exercise in pronunciation. One of the most persistent mistakes of students, one that really interferes with intelligibility, is the failure to change the quality of a stressed vowel before a soft consonant. Students pronounce stal and stali, často and čast' with the same [a]-sound; kabinet and v kabinete with the same [e]-sound. Unfortunately bad habits may be so strong by second year that some students do not even hear the distinction. A remedial drill is illustrated in Fig. 2; I must admit, however, that such remedial drills have limited results. I do provide a script and a tape for the few stakhanovite students who practice on their own, but most find it difficult to practice phonetics alone. Pronunciation drills are best conducted by the teacher, whether in class or in the lab. Variation in pitch, volume, and speed help students stay awake, and make them less uncomfortable about producing the crazy Russian sounds.

Pronunciation drill. Remedial work on stressed vowels.

Context: C = hard consonant Ç = soft consonant

	Tape	Repeat	TAPE (louder)	REPEAT (louder)
CáC	стáл	/--/	СТÁЛ	/--/
CáÇ	стáли	/--/	СТÁЛИ	/--/
ÇáC	чáсто	/--/	ЧÁСТО	/--/
ÇáÇ	чáсть	/--/	ЧÁСТЬ	/--/
ÇéC	кабинéт	/--/	КАБИНÉТ	/--/
ÇeÇ	в кабинéте	/--/	В КАБИНÉТЕ	/--/

Figure 2

This type of drill should actually be incorporated into the first lessons of the ELEMENTARY course, when prepositional case and past tense are first introduced. Then there would be no need for remedial work.

3. Now for Item III. The tapes that are most used by our students, though their use is optional, are the keys to the Russian-to-English translations. These are not very exciting: I simply read a translation of the homework sentences onto a tape, with occasional explanations. Such translations are, alas, still necessary in most of our courses. Given limited classroom time, there is nothing to replace the training in accurate writing that they provide.

But whenever we make up sentences for review, we always find that some of the points are new to half the class. The Review Sentences in Townsend's Continuing with Russian (McGraw-Hill 1970) are very valuable, but are too difficult for many second year students and take an inordinate amount of time. If there are too many mistakes on the papers, the students get discouraged, and it is hard for the teacher to tell what points most need explaining in class.

The taped keys take the curse off these exercises. Students prepare their translations, then correct them with the help of the keys, handing in the corrected copy. Some prefer to work in the lab, letting the tape give them words instead of looking them up in the vocabulary. Either way the tape provides ear training and a dictation exercise. Most important, it acts as a filter, providing instant feedback and correction of "old" mistakes such as *on skazala or *moja deduška. The student need not be distracted

or embarrassed by such mistakes. They can be corrected quickly and privately. It is less discouraging for both student and teacher if the papers come back with fewer red marks, and the teacher can then see at a glance which areas of grammar need further work in class.

4. As is well known, tapes can also be used as an aid to reading. But it is not enough to hire a Russian lady to read Taman' onto a tape. Few students use such tapes, except perhaps when reviewing for the final. Such review does help in pulling up reading speed. In general, however, straight recordings do not give the student enough value for the time spent.

We must remember that the use of the lab means an expedition, time spent in getting there and back. Students go to the lab IF it saves them enough time to make the trip worth while; if it takes some of the drudgery out of the homework. And this is what we try to do with our reading tapes.

The teacher (or informant) reads a paragraph, then goes back over it, to paraphrase, to give a word or two in English, to explain some detail. In more advanced courses, such as Russian Civilization, the tape can give quite a bit of background information in Russian. Margaret Freeman of MIT, who developed many of these techniques over the years, has used tapes extensively with assignments from history books that are not equipped with vocabularies and notes.

This kind of tape has several advantages. It is less frustrating for the student than looking up all the words; it enables the class to cover richer material while leaving more class time for speaking. Richer material also means the students have more to talk about in class. The tape makes it easier for them to speak, but we also hand out written questions to help with speaking in class. Besides, we can quickly gloss unimportant words, while emphasizing on tape those words we really want the students to learn. The tapes also help students catch up after an illness and are available for individual study.

Both the keys and the reading tapes are very informal. Technically they are rather terrible. We speak into the mike much as we would if we were going over a text with a group of students in class or in office hours, with hesitations, corridor noises, and so on. This does not seem to bother the students, who generally appreciate our efforts. The technical flaws may help keep them awake, who knows. And perhaps there is more sense of a human presence than there is with impersonal commercial tapes. Teachers should not be overawed by technology: why SHOULD a tape be any better than the teacher in person? If we can do something useful for our students, something that shows we value their time, we do it. But we also value our own time, and we have more exciting things to do than make hi-fi recordings of the Russian homework. Students understand this.

5. The use of the lab for examinations is probably familiar to most of you, as is the sad fact that taped exams take a long time to grade.

One rather enjoyable test (or exercise) is illustrated below. A list of personal questions, requests for feedback on the course, etc. is handed out for advance preparation. Similar but not identical questions are asked on the test, orally or in writing, depending on timing and on the available equipment (a testing machine that records the students' responses without the teacher's questions is a great time saver). Sample questions are:

Как вас зову́т? (Да́йте фами́лию, зате́м и́мя и о́тчество.)
У вас есть бра́тья, или сёстры?
Вы занима́етесь каки́м-нибудь спо́ртом?

Из того́, что мы чита́ли, что́ вам бо́льше всего́ понра́вилось?
А что́ ме́ньше всего́ понравилось?
Из того́, что мы чита́ли, что́ вам показа́лось трудне́е всего́?
Как вы организу́ете своё вре́мя? (Use time expressions.)

Another type of test (or exercise) is based on reading materials for which a recording is available, so that students can imitate the intonation when answering questions. The sample is drawn from an exercise on Chekhov's Dama s sobačkoj, for which there is an excellent Soviet recording by the actor Žuravlev. Students are asked to number the lines in their text. They must translate each question orally, then answer it. If the question is already answered, they translate the answer.

Lines in text	Questions (some with answers)	Vocabulary & Notes
70	Did A. S. respect her husband? -No, she considered him a lackey.	считай- (кого)(кем)
72	How old was she when she got married? -	
99-125	Does it seem to you that in the course of this trip to Oreanda they are beginning to love each other? -	в тече́ние (чего)
144-156	Did A.S.'s husband arrive? -	

Surprisingly, pronunciation and intonation were better than when these students were asked to record a passage they read aloud after practicing. THEY SPEAK BETTER WHEN COMMUNICATING!

The teacher takes notes on gross mistakes, gives a slip with feedback to the student. Grading is based on intelligibility and evidence that the reading has been understood; grammatical mistakes that do not affect intelligibility do not affect the grade on this test.

6. Now we come to our last and favorite exercise. Students listen to a story with no text, as many times as they need to to write a two-page pereskaz of the plot. A partial vocabulary is provided if necessary. It is important to give ONLY THE MOST ESSENTIAL WORDS, for the purpose of the exercise is to train the students to understand without compulsively translating every word. We must prepare our students for real conversations with Russians, when they will not know every word they hear: it is important that they be trained to take cues from intonation. They must learn to listen for what is most important, to practice recognizing the forms they do know while ignoring background "noise."

One story we have used with great success in 3rd semester is Panteleev's Čestnoe slovo, which is also interesting from the point of view of culture. By the time the students have written their summaries, they know the story and can talk about it in class. (It takes two to three hearings for most students.)

It is a good idea to assign this exercise as a take-home test with a definite due date, for instance as a mid-term, so that all will have done it on the same day. I like to assign it in place of a Friday class: students can listen without straining the lab facilities, any time from Thursday till class time on Monday. Students appreciate the flexibility, and the knowledge that the tapes can be played over and over reduces anxiety. You may ask your students to observe the honor system, not to discuss the plot with their classmates and competitors at all, or to discuss it only in Russian.

In the Spring semester, we have used Paustovskij's Sneg, or Chekhov's Dama s sobačkoj, for which excellent Soviet recordings exist. We have also used the Moscow recording of Prokof'ev's Petja i volk; we put an English version borrowed from the Music library on reserve, for those culturally deprived students who did not hear it in their childhood.

Some students later dig up the text and read the story on their own. Interestingly enough, some find it harder than they did the first time around: When they LISTENED to Čestnoe slovo, they could tell when the narrator was describing a small boy in affectionate terms, and it did not matter if they did not know what vesnuški or portjanki meant. But when they READ, the compulsion to know every word returned, and they would interrupt the story to look up words.

The same with Dama s sobačkoj. To a Russian reader, the description of Gurov's hotel room in Samara briefly sets the mood without delaying the plot. But when a second year student reads the story, this brief digression assumes Gogolian proportions: it takes more time to get through than the rest of the chapter, and the structure of the literary work is thereby distorted for that student.

If he LISTENS, however, there is no such distortion. The passage remains brief, and the digression is signalled by the intonation. We hope that more good dramatic recordings will become widely available, and will be more widely used in literature as well as in language courses. Listening helps preserve the structure of a literary work for the student who reads at an uneven pace.

7. You must have noticed that I have not mentioned pattern drills. As we are all painfully aware, pattern practice in the lab tends to break down during the second semester of elementary Russian. Students find they can do as well by studying from a printed source. Drills are drudgery, and the lonely lab is no place for drudgery. Drills are best reviewed in printed form, with tapes optional when available, and practiced in a few minutes of class time.

The more successful uses of the lab at this level are those which help the student get through interesting material faster, and help toward fusing the so-called Four Skills into something that can be used for communication: a LANGUAGE.

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*MLA/ERIC version of paper read before Annual Meeting of AATSEEL, New York City, December 27, 1972. This version incorporates some of the material on the handout distributed at the meeting.

[1] MIT is fortunate in having satellite booths in some dormitories, with telephone connection to the main language laboratory. The current assignment may be dialled automatically, even when the lab is not attended. The new

trend toward the use of cassettes should eliminate some of the present logistics problems in schools with a less accessible laboratory.

References:

The sample for Unit 1 is drawn from Igor Wu-Jot, Vy govorite po-russki? Nauka języka rosyjskiego z płyt, Warsaw: Poliglota, 1961. Cracovia, London.

The text for Panteleev's Čestnoe slovo may be found in H. G. Lunt, Kniga dlja čtenija, The Hague: Mouton, 1957.

The tape for Petja i Volk was purchased from Russian Language Specialties. The other stories are available in a number of U. S. and Soviet readers; recordings were purchased from Victor Kamkin's.

For addresses of suppliers of materials and for ideas, see A Teacher's Notebook: Russian, edited by G. Deptula, available for $1.00 from National Association of Independent Schools, 4 Liberty Square, Boston, Mass. 02109.